

SLOW MOTIONS. COMMENTS ON A FEW TEXTS BY MARILYN STRATHERN¹

EDUARDO VIVEIROS DE CASTRO &
MARCIO GOLDMAN

TRANSLATION BY ASHLEY LEBNER

With the work of Marilyn Strathern the world has become more complicated, or should we say, describing the world has become more complicated. We (EVC and MG) are still learning how to know Strathern's anthropology. She has an extensive oeuvre, in progress, that we have not read exhaustively; and, more importantly, she has created a new language for the discipline, whose conventions must be absorbed little by little, to adequately appreciate all the power of invention

¹ The text below was edited from transcriptions of three lectures given by us in April 2006, at the Museu Nacional section of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Naturally, the oral quality of the lectures that we decided to 'maintain' was achieved through various rewritings of the original transcription; and the dated character of our statements ('April 2006') hide a number of surreptitious insertions made in January 2009.

These lectures were part of the post-graduate course 'Introduction to a post-social anthropology: networks, multiplicities and symmetrisations'. It experimented with new directions in anthropology created by the collision of certain concepts ('invention/convention', 'reversibility', 'reflexivity', 'actor-network', 'symmetry', 'partial connection', and 'multiplicity', among others) proposed by authors like Roy Wagner, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Marilyn Strathern. The course was based on the collective text 'Symmetry, reversibility and reflexivity: great divides and small multiplicities' (<http://sites.google.com/a/abaetenet.net/nansi/Home/simetria-reversibilidade-e-reflexividade>), of the Abaeté Network of Symmetrical Anthropology, that influenced a series of dissertations, theses and other works of participants (and of the network).

The expression 'post-social anthropology' should be understood as synonymous with 'pre-x anthropology' where X is an unknown. We only speak of 'post-social' because we are imagining something still to come and we do not know, nor can we, what it is. We would like to thank those who taped our classes, with or without our knowledge; to Fábio Candotti, for the transcription of the material, and to Renato Sztutman, for the preliminary editing of the transcripts. The course as a whole should be published, in 2009, by Cosac Naify (São Paulo) under the title 'Introduction to post-social anthropology'.

contained therein. It is a difficult language, not only because its writing is stylistically demanding (including for native speakers), but also because it is the instrument and the site of a complex analytical movement, the controlled interference of two diverging ethnographic fluxes – the Melanesian and the Euro-American – which are allowed to interact with and counter-affect two discourses that are themselves distinct: the theoretical discourse of anthropology and the political discourse of feminism (and/or vice-versa). These fluxes and these discourses have different thematic attractors, of which we will highlight, due to the texts that we have chosen for commentary, the theme of knowledge, the theme of property, and the theme of kinship. The recursive application of each one of these three themes on the other two produces a marvellously intricate descriptive weave. The master-concept that will serve as a frame for all of these gestures of connection and separation, this poly-rhythmic alternation (or perspectival exchange) between the ethnographic flux and the analytical cut, is the conceptual multiplicity known as the 'relation'. Strathernian anthropology is the most sophisticated theory of the relation that our discipline has produced since Lévi-Strauss's structuralism.

In the interview she gave to *Mana*, Strathern said that she belongs 'to the other camp, that which chose to deliberately exaggerate the differences, simply because this obliges us to think' (Strathern 1999d: 172–173). Her work emphatically involves a 'stop to think', a slow deliberate gesture of standing back, a kind of infinite slowness of analytical thought, that at the same time projects itself forward at a vertiginous speed: a heady heedfulness, as it were. Slowness and velocity are 'meta-themes' in Strathern's work, as are almost all of the issues she explores.

The idea of slowness – the approach to the question of movement from the point at which its difference in relation to immobility is minimal – seems to me strategic. We need to stop to think, in order to not stop thinking. Strathern has written caustic and luminous pages on the pseudo-changes that have overtaken the University world: the ideology of productivity and high intellectual turnover, of managerial efficiency, of value for money; in short, the audit culture, the 'enterprising-up' of academia; the hell we have come to know only too well.

In the case of anthropological research in particular, time is a fundamental variable, or perhaps I should have said constant. Slowness is absolutely indispensable to the process of knowledge. One needs to let things mature. There is a certain time in the field (most of the time, actually) in which it seems that nothing is done, nothing happens, within as well as without; there is a moment in writing in which it seems

we are bogged down for good, nothing moves, thought is blocked. But that is just where things start; in the deadening times ideas are born. Where nothing happens – that is where everything begins to change.

Thus, let us recursively apply the rule: we are not in a rush, we are not trying to understand the texts of Marilyn Strathern hastily, because they are slow, hesitant texts, folded within themselves, texts that heave and halt, and keep coming back to where they started. This slowness is, naturally, partial, and partially deceptive. Suddenly, the analysis jumps: more to the side, you understand, in a direction that the reader was not expecting. The texts move as if in a flash to unforeseen positions. The extreme slowness is shot through with sudden scintillations, surprising effects of action at a distance.

I. The language of description (‘The ethnographic effect I’ and ‘The ethnographic effect II’)²

The analytical texts of Strathern are continuous with the subjects they treat. That is why they present that already-mentioned stylistic complexity: their organisation is deliberately motivated by what they are speaking about. Hence the sensation that the Strathernian text is a strange text. Because, in truth, it looks like its own object. An object, needless to say, that is constructed by the text, or rather, *in* the text and *as* a text – but a text that does not construct itself as castles in the air are constructed. ‘Ethnographies are the analytical constructions of scholars; the peoples they study are not’ (Strathern 1988: xii).

At the end of ‘The ethnographic effect I’, Strathern concludes that ‘the ethnographic method ... begins to look extremely promising’ (Strathern 1999a: 25–26). Slightly before, she states that her work ‘is neither a matter of piling on theoretical antecedents nor a matter of going where no one has been before’. We should go precisely where we have always been, that is, again to the immediate here-and-nows from which we have created our knowledge of the world. This implies working with the *retrospective* vision of the possibility of unforeseen results, and with the consciousness that the simple being-in-the-present permits that the investigator recuperates materials that previous investigators did not know they were collecting. That is why ethnography is ‘extremely promising’.

At the end of the Preface of *Property, substance and effect* there is a passage that I ask permission to cite *in extenso*, as it constitutes an especially scintillating moment of Marilyn Strathern’s theoretical project:

² Strathern (1999a; 1999b).

[T]hese essays are ... retrospective. That personalises a professional conviction that social anthropology does not always do enough with its past. It has contributed uniquely to human knowledge by its studies of human knowledge. In doing so, it draws attention to one consistent characteristic of social life, namely the complex kinds of reflection upon themselves that people afford one another through their relations with one another. ...

I wish to note where I stand in the division of labour between myself and my colleagues [N.B. *that is a reflexive application of the phrase that came before*]. These essays document, among other things, a continuing struggle with the language of description. Description presupposes analysis, and analysis presupposes theory, and they all presuppose imagination. The issue is how we may best describe knowing the effect which descriptions have on one another, that one description is always interpreted in the company of others and nothing is in that sense by itself. Social anthropologists make the question explicit: they work openly through other people's descriptions (Strathern 1999e: xi–xii).

A struggle with language: 'language can work against the user of it' (ibid: 18). The struggle is visible, and this visibility is part of the author's 'aesthetic' – to coin a term. The language of Strathern always gives a strong overall impression of ambiguity; but this does not seem to us to be a *defect*; it is, rather, an *effect*. As computer software programmers are fond of saying: 'it's not a bug, it's a feature'; in the present case, this, for once, is true! Marilyn Strathern's incessant struggle with language reproduces itself in the reader, who is engaged in a constant struggle with the language of Marilyn Strathern. Please note that I am not complaining.

Let us consider the above example.

It is not completely clear for me, in this long passage, whether we are facing the general demand that, when one describes *something*, the analytical consciousness must never *lose sight of the effects* that the descriptions produce on one another (so as to factor in and/or out such effects); or whether it addresses a more specific objective, namely *to describe the effects* that descriptions produce on one another. These are two slightly different things. How can we describe in the best possible way *the fact that we know* that the effects that descriptions have on one another have implications? Or: how can we describe something in the best possible way, *knowing* the effects that descriptions have on one another? That ambiguity is intrinsic to the text of Strathern, and only a native speaker could, perhaps, resolve the enigma (if there is one!).

The author concludes, tersely:

those descriptions invariably include people referring to fellow people as thinking and feeling beings, and attribute what they say and do to

how they think and feel, but that is not the same as studying how people think and feel and this is not intended to be such a study. As on other occasions, the present work remains agnostic as to the emotions, states of mind or mental processes of the people mentioned here (ibid: xii).

That observation allows us to evaluate the distance that separates the intellectual project of Marilyn Strathern from what almost all of our colleagues are intending' to do – or think that they are doing. But is it really a great distance, or is it only a slight displacement of perspective – a change that changes everything? A battle with the language of description: with the very language of description, mind you, not with the language of others, the language of those who are being described (whose language, in other words, is being described). In short, she is not aiming to interpret the language of others with the help of the theoretico-theological devices currently used to interpret the 'emotions, states of mind or mental processes of the people' (ibid).

It is important to note that Strathern does not make much of terms like 'interpretation' or 'explanation'. She favours another technical word 'description'. Interpretations and explications are modes of description. All description is always interpreted, and this always occurs in contrast with other descriptions. There is no description that is not relative to the descriptive context, that is, to the set (virtual and actual) of other descriptions. In sum, I understand that for Marilyn Strathern all description includes explanations and interpretations; explanations and interpretations made by those – anthropologists or natives – describing the actions of other persons (human or otherwise). Describing, that is, the 'mental states' of other persons. But precisely, this does *not* mean defining anthropology as the study of the mental states of persons, either directly or through their simulation in the mind of the analyst.

There is a well-known distinction in philosophy between first-person descriptions and third-person descriptions. Strathern seems to be looking for something in between these two modes of description. The first-person description is a phenomenological dream: 'I must be capable of subjectively experimenting the way in which the native thinks and feels the world'. On the other side is the positivist project: 'I will produce an objective, impersonal account of the way in which the native thinks and feels the world'. This would be a pure third-person description of a physical system, or a would-be physical system (the mind of the native) that go through states we call thoughts, feelings, emotions, reasonings – in sum, energetic states that are detectable by certain objective indices (the blood pressure of the speaker, an MRI of her cortex etc.). Marilyn Strathern does not at all propose a third-person perspective. But neither

does she assume the first-person perspective; she is *agnostic*, exactly what the phenomenologist isn't (he spent all his agnosticism at the moment of the phenomenological reduction). Strathern proposes something different, a *relational description*. The first and third persons are weak relational positions; by employing the third person we are of course radically different than what we describe, but in employing the first person, we are also, perhaps even more, different, because we are describing ourselves and no one can do that in our place. Maybe Marilyn Strathern has invented a kind of non-dialogic second person, as it does not deal with dialogue; she invented a complex variation of free indirect speech. We do not find in her texts many direct citations of the phrases of natives; there is, in general, little cited discourse. But, at the same time, the free indirect descriptive speech of hers does not follow the classical model of narrating as if the author has privileged access to the mental states and silent inferences of the native (who remains, nevertheless, a native, that is, whose 'first-impersonation' by the analyst does not prevent the latter from crucially modulating the description with ever so slight an amount of epistemic irony). With the texts of Strathern, something very different happens; finding its exact 'enunciation point' (as when one says melting or boiling point) is a challenging task. That is because this point is *variable*, varying most when the author passes from Melanesia to Europe.

In short, what Marilyn Strathern is proposing is a perspectivist theory of description that takes as its privileged object the exchange of perspectives, which is of the same order as the relation between her discourse and that which she analyses. Hence the vertiginous or labyrinthine effect of her writing. The exchange of perspectives is for her the prototype of all anthropological analysis, the ethnographic moment a kind of recurring hallucination, a primal conceptual scene as it were. Strathern's 'description' – the exchange between the language of the subject who describes and that of the subject who is being described – is a structural transformation of the exchange of perspectives. This is necessarily effectuated by the social relation as a 'double duplex': both analytical tool and object of analysis, both a conceptual entity and an affectual movement. There is, then, a kind of recursive imbrication that is the mark of an analytical device far more powerful and consequential than, say, a whimsical preference for the baroque *concetto* [*concetto*, i.e. Italian for 'concept', was the name given in the Baroque era to certain complex, convoluted poetic images, conveying metaphysical or religious implications]. Everything happens as if there was no other possibility for anthropology as a discipline – either we do *that*, or we will not get much further (at best) than a noble engagement in the struggle for human rights. I am not saying that fighting for human rights is without value, but simply that

one does not need to be an anthropologist to do it. It is enough to have a minimum of 'human' decency. From there on in, everything gets much more complicated.

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When Tânia Stolze Lima and I wrote about Amazonian perspectivism, we had not paid the slightest attention to this other meaning of perspectivism as elaborated by Marilyn Strathern. I had already read 'Parts and wholes' (Strathern 1992) before writing my article 'Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism' (Castro 1998), but Strathernian perspectivism escaped me completely. It was only after having developed an Amazonian notion of perspectivism that I was able to make Melanesian perspectivism visible within my own conceptual aesthetic. I presume the same applies to Stolze Lima.

Strathern pairs Amazonian perspectivism – with all of its shamanic significance, involving differentiated visions of each species – with the Melanesian theme of the exchange of perspectives and its strong genderised codification, which is a more 'sociological' perspectivism. The exchange of Melanesian perspectives is not an exchange of seen worlds; it is an exchange of relations between 'giver' and 'receiver'. It is not a problem of 'vision' in the literal, sometimes anatomic sense one may encounter in Amazonian and similar worlds (different species have 'different eyes' etc.). Perhaps the gift, the object, the conch or the pork have eyes, but this is not the most important. I note that Strathern does not directly mention (if memory serves) that one can find, in Melanesia, cosmological complexes that are somewhat evocative of those found in Amazonia (the Kaluli's or the Korowai's, for example). But that is because it does not matter much, for Strathern, to know whether in Melanesia, in Malaysia or in Siberia there exist perspectivist ideas that are similar to the Amazonian. It is much more important, for her, to indicate different possibilities of interpretation of perspectivism – and much more interesting, for Amazonianists, that she does that.

In the triangulation done by Strathern, the Amazonian perspective and the Melanesian are on one side, and the modernist perspective on the other. In the case of Amazonia and Melanesia, one perspective assumes the perspective of another. In the modern, pluralist perspectivism (the expression is mine), each individual exists with their vision of the world, always incomplete, and then there is the perspective of the whole, the society, which is incommensurable with the perspectives of individuals-parts. In that world, each perspective, by including another point-of-view as part of itself, has to exclude it as a

perspective. In other words, there is a hierarchy. Marilyn Strathern emphasises this contrast, as for her, fundamentally, modern perspectivism is a false perspectivism, or better, modern representational pluralism is a different regime from that which we could call the regime of perspectival multiplicity.

At the end of 'The ethnographic effect II' she adds: 'I repeat the point that an exchange of perspectives is not to be confused with the European gaze. A mutual gaze in the contemporary Euro-American mode is two perspectives each from an individual standpoint on to the world' (1999a: 260). The exchange of perspectives to which Strathern refers should not therefore be confused with visualism, the European ocularcentrism. The mutual gaze in the contemporary Euro-American mode returns us to two points of individual views on the world. It is a duplicated dualism, as we can see in the Euro-American model of filiation, in which a child can be seen from the point of view of the mother and the point of view of the father. In Euro-America, in sum, there are no exchanges of perspectives; there are simply accumulations of different and individualised perspectives on the world. In the Melanesian model, she continues, 'for which I have imagined a visual theory of sorts, any one perspective elicits another' (ibid). The point of view of the father, as much as the point of view of the mother are contained in the child, and the fundamental question is how these points of view alternate in the child. EVC

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According to Strathern, to understand the modern or post-modern pluralist perspectivism, we have to look to renaissance perspectivism. What is involved in renaissance perspectivism is the idea of encompassment, as there is always a perspective capable of encompassing the others, and that is the perspective of God. In the case of modern or post-modern perspectivism, the only relationship between the plural perspectives is that one of them encompasses the rest; it is one of them negating the others as perspectives. Perhaps it is this that has permitted the definition of anthropology as the study of the perspective of others. And the whole issue becomes: is the perspective of others a perspective, or not? MG

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The focus on notions like exchange and perspective attend to a double interest. In the first place, they are concerned with certain Melanesian/Amazonian knowledge practices; in the second place, they relate to a certain style of doing anthropology. 'Perspective' is a term

that connects (relates) the relation 'between' anthropological and Melanesian discourse to what is happening 'inside' Melanesian discourse. By the same token, the notion of exchange defines not only the exchange of perspectives between Melanesians, but also an exchange between the perspective of the anthropologist, modernist or Euro-American, and the perspective of the native. Exchange and perspective are trans-epistemological notions inasmuch as they establish a continuity between the object of description and the description itself. In sum, the process of anthropological description is, itself, a process of the exchange of perspectives. This contrasts with the idea that an anthropological description is the encompassment of the point of view of the other. Strathern wants to escape the alternative between 'pluralist' or 'liberal' relativism, on the one hand, and 'imperialist' or 'conservative' universalism, on the other. It is not necessary to choose between these two alternatives, another world is possible... We have there an epistemological alter-globalism.

In a certain sense, the reflections on the Amazonian and Melanesian perspectivism are already given in the ethnographic material. But, beyond the specificities of both ethnographic areas, the idea of perspectivism connects the discourse of the 'observer' and the 'observed' in ways that are definitely non-traditional. Classically, the encompassment of the native's perspective by that of the anthropologist is one of the conditions of possibility of the discipline – perhaps *the* condition. In other words, it is imperative that the anthropologist be able not to take the native *too* seriously, this way the former can reconstruct the latter's 'point of view' without losing any sleep over it. The alternative to that epistemic colonialism is to transform the notion of perspective in a notion that in fact destabilises anthropological discourse, obliging it to assume the perspective of the other *as such*. In Melanesia, writes Strathern, the subjects assume the perspectives of others above all because they are obliged to. The gift consists precisely in obliging the partner to the exchange, in producing an *effect*. Effect is, by the way, a keyword here, as effectiveness is found in opposition to reflexivity. Melanesian knowledge practices consist in producing effects on other people; they thus constitute a theory of social action. Something different is produced by the theory of Western knowledge: it is less linked to the idea of effectiveness than to the idea of representation.

EVC

II. No parts, no wholes (‘Parts and wholes’, 1992)

The relation between part and whole is a specific inflection of the more general problem of our course: how to produce a non-dualist conceptual alternative to conceptual dualisms that organise and constitute the field of anthropology: individual and society, nature and culture, traditional and modern. Producing a non-dualist conceptual alternative to these dualisms is to produce a conceptual alternative to anthropology as it has been done until now. The authors that we are dealing with in our course seem to suggest that the alternative lies, variously or jointly, in three notions: network, multiplicity and symmetry. Multiplicity, not plurality. Network (or rhizome) rather than totality. And symmetry instead of critique.

But this dichotomous representation is clearly insufficient. Because the three concepts that we indicate as alternatives are not terms within pairs of opposition; they exclude rather than imply the classic oppositions themselves. Thus, what the *network* pre-empts, is not some entity or principle – the whole – but the dialectical twosome part/whole. That from which *multiplicity* frees us is the dichotomy one/multiple (which in anthropology appears as, for example, nature/culture). And what symmetry blocks is not a simple inequality between two terms of the relation of anthropological knowledge (‘us’ and ‘them’), but the epistemo-political organisation of the discourse of the discipline *in these terms*, the terms of the polarities us/them, self/other, subject/object. These concepts are non-dichotomous; as such, they do not *oppose* the oppositions we have mentioned; they *substitute* them, which is a very different operation.

The theme of multiplicity is perhaps of a more general order than the themes of the network and symmetry. The network is the ontological mode of multiplicity; symmetry is its epistemological mode. With the notion of network, we face another image of *social reality*, that is no longer composed of domains, levels or spheres but rather of filaments and machinic connections, of apparatuses-devices (*dispositifs*) and assemblages (*agencements*). With the notion of symmetry, another image of *anthropological thought* becomes possible, which no longer has critique as its method and classification as its object, but looks rather towards invention and self-contextualisation.

‘Parts and wholes’ is a fundamental article in the work of Marilyn Strathern. It was presented in a colloquium organised by Daniel de Coppet, an eminent Melanesianist who was the major continuator of the work of Louis Dumont in France. We owe de Coppet the maintenance of a vigilant orthodoxy relative to the nature of *fundamentum inconcussum*

to be attributed to the ideas of totality and hierarchy within anthropological theory. The success of this vigilance in the French academic context was, shall we say, moderate – and, moreover, somewhat redundant, since the local theoretical sensitivity has always been strongly pre-adapted to a Dumontian outlook.

Strathern, from her position of ‘standing back’ from the concept of society as totality, *also* intends to bypass the concept of individual, while Dumontians start from a critique of the concept of the individual in order to reconstruct an even *more* totalising notion of society. These are, in fact, two totally antipodal movements, even though Strathern seeks a possible passage between them (or merely appears to seek; nothing is simple here). What is in play for her is the issue of how to move from a pluralist vision of society to a notion of sociality as multiplicity. Note that she does not use the word multiplicity at any point in ‘Parts and wholes’. We take it she is aiming at something extremely close to the Deleuzian concept of multiplicity, though. She does use the word plurality on various occasions, to say that the plural world is the characteristic world of modernity, and that the problem, for various reasons, is how to leave it, or how to theoretically articulate the anthropological fact that we have already left it. From plurality to multiplicity, therefore, because the post-plural world is everything but a unitary and unified world. It is not a question to leave (or have left) a plural world to rejoin the One, wherever and whenever it exists/ed.

In that essay, Strathern retraces some crucial moments of the history of British Social Anthropology of the last fifty years. She operates on the reciprocal effects of the ethno-anthropological Euro-American discourse and the discourses (or descriptions) upon which the former elaborates – for example, the Melanesian – pointing to the vacuousness of whatever pretension to produce an analytical discourse that is not immanently ethnographic. There is a radicalisation of the idea that ethnography is theory and vice-versa.

Strathern says that it is necessary to rethink a certain ‘arithmetic’ of the micro and macro, of the part and the whole, of the one and the plural. The introduction to the notion of the ‘fractal’, in this context, is a means to reengage and rethink the problem of the metonymy, the trope that will mark all of post-structuralist anthropology. One should not imagine the whole as greater than the sum of its parts, nor is it equal to the sum of its parts: the whole is a version of the part and the part is a version of the whole. The passage from the whole to the part and from the part to the whole is ontologically smooth: the whole is as relative as its parts. With this, the distinction is destabilised. Instead of wholes and parts we have something like multiplicity and singularity.

If there is neither part nor whole, neither is there inside and outside, as these are movements of the exteriorisation and interiorisation of relations rather than zones or domains. And, finally, there is neither individual nor society. There is an inter-convertibility (version, conversion) without residue between the concept of person and the concept of relation. Persons are relations in the 'corpuscular' phase or mode, and relations are persons in the 'wavelike' mode. And by the bye, there is nothing 'algebraic' in imagining persons composed of relations; on the contrary, it means effectively defining a 'geometry' – rather than an 'algebra' – but a non-Euclidean geometry (Archimedean, perhaps) in which the force fields are prior to the forms that emerge in them, and the objects are not defined by their perimeters of circumscription but, rather, by their centres of expansion or radiation.

There is thus a kind of principle of complementarity of the Melanesian person. It appears *either* 'in person' (the figure of the person against the continuous ground of relations), *or* 'in relation' (the movement of the relation against the particulate ground of persons). It is here that Strathern introduces the notion of an exchange of perspectives or of perspectivism, a terribly important notion for Tânia Stolze Lima and I, that we used to describe what is happening in Amazonian cosmopraxis, although we employed the notion of perspective in a homonymic rather than synonymic sense to Strathern's usage (but the tightening of the connection is in full progress). The exchange of perspectives that Strathern finds in Melanesia brings a whole new perspective (literally) to the concept of exchange: *the determination of the concept of exchange by the concept of perspective*. As Wagner (1967) showed for the case of the Daribi, matrimonial exchange produces its own terms, the givers and the receivers. There do not exist groups who exchange, there are exchanges that 'group', and all grouping is a perspective. Strathern contrasts the exchange of perspectives of Melanesia with modernist perspectivism, or cultural relativism: the idea that there are infinitely numerous points of view on the world. In that view, perspectives cannot be exchanged (the impossibility that characterises cultural relativism). A perspective can only perceive another perspective by transforming it into a part of itself – by hierarchising the perspectives, as it were. This is exactly what anthropology does in the classical, pre-symmetrical mode, when it conceives the culture of the native as a *part*, a subset of the nature-culture twosome that characterises the West.

Strathern proposes to redescribe the West from the concept of perspective that she develops in the Melanesian context. She makes an interesting observation with respect to the post-modern idea of fragmentation, of the collapse of totalities. The notion of the fragment supposes a whole that is lost forever, and therefore, a whole still more

powerful than the old Durkheimian totality: a bit like the dead father in *Totem and Taboo*, who is much more terrible than the living father. The whole appears there, then, as the agent of repression within *anthropology's discourse*. That is why the multiplicity that Strathern attributes to the Melanesian mode of social existence is not a fragmentation, it is not a proliferation of pieces, but a state that we could call an incessant ontological alternation, or an intrinsic movement of scaling. Why is she so interested in scale? Because the individual is society in miniature and society is the individual expanded. Both are relational mixes.

The figure of the Melanesian person is instructive, because through it we can conceptualise the difference between Melanesians and us. It is not about substituting the Euro-American concept by the Melanesian concept as the best candidate for impersonating the Universal: the Melanesian person is not a better proposition than the former, it is no more faithful to the true essence of the Human than the Western individual. The notion of the Melanesian person only emerges in the context of an attempt to conceptualise the difference between Melanesia and Euro-Americans. Classic British Social Anthropology is a sub-particular discourse, a rather minor episode in the discourse of Euro-American societies on other societies. Yet Strathern is not suggesting we substitute these discourses (the minor and the major) by a super-discourse that would be less particular, something like the word of God, a point of view of nowhere (or everywhere) that would transcend and encompass both Euro-American discursivity and the Melanesian. What she proposes is, far more modestly, a new manner of relating these two discourses without retroprojecting something like a greater common denominator of all cultures: human nature, that is.

There are, thus, two different relationalisms in Strathern: the relational notion of the (Melanesian) person and the relational conception of (anthropological) knowledge. The recursive relation between them is just what makes her anthropology interesting, because it is deliberately unstable (or 'meta-stable', as a reader of Gilbert Simondon would say). EVC

III. From Melanesia to us (*'The New Modernities'*; *'Cutting the Network'*)³

The Strathernian discussion of the ideas of the authors who have examined the modern world (like Bruno Latour and James Clifford) brings to mind the distinction between sociology and anthropology

³ Strathern (1999c; 1996; 1987).

proposed by Lévi-Strauss originally in 1954, in his article 'The place of anthropology in the social sciences and the problems raised in teaching it' (republished in *Structural Anthropology* 1963). Lévi-Strauss affirms that while sociology tries to do the 'social science of the observer', anthropology seeks to elaborate a 'social science of the observed'. Sociology, even when it takes as its object a different society, is solidary with the point of view of the observer. Anthropology, in contrast, elaborates a social science of the observed,

either by endeavouring to reproduce, in its description of strange and remote societies, the standpoint of the natives themselves, or by broadening its subject so as to cover the observer's society but at the same time trying to evolve a frame of reference based on ethnographical experience and independent both of the observer and of what he is observing (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 363).

On the basis of the ethnographic experience, anthropology would thus be able to establish an absolute point of view, independent of both the observer's and his object's. Here one sees the theological dimension of Lévi-Straussian anthropology. If we discount this dimension, however, we can transport the anthropology/sociology distinction to Strathern encounter with the ideas of Latour and Clifford. Speaking in very broad terms, we could say that Strathern sees in Latour's and Clifford's analyses the work of sociologists, in no pejorative sense. Both authors occasionally speak of other societies using general anthropological propositions, and have a very good grasp of our discipline's 'language game'. Still, Strathern suspects that they remain riveted to issues and problems that are very specific to the society to which they belong. If we use the vocabulary of 'The limits of auto-anthropology', we can argue that there is a continuity between what these authors say and the knowledge practices of the society to which they belong.

In this article, Strathern distinguishes 'auto-anthropology' and 'anthropology at home'. Perhaps we could make a further distinction, between 'anthropology at home' and an 'anthropology from home' (or a 'home-made anthropology') that would approximate the definition of sociology we have just cited: a knowledge practice in total epistemic continuity with the questions raised by the society of the observer. In 'Cutting the network', Strathern asks herself about the effect that a notion of symmetrical anthropology can have for a Melanesianist. Let us recall that Latour introduced this notion to speak about science and, later, of politics, the two overarching practico-theoretical modes of our society. My own reading of the reasoning of Latour is more or less the following: if an anthropologist that studies Melanesia aims at a type of understanding of Melanesians that is predicated in the taking utterly

seriously what they say, this does not mean that such an aim must be pursued in the same way and with the same means as when we work with scientists. Because the points of departure are asymmetrical, and the operation of symmetrisation does not mean to suppose that everything 'is the same thing'. Symmetrisation means choosing the right procedures, which may be the very opposite of those employed in a 'Melanesian-type', so that the *process* is symmetrical, producing a certain epistemic *discontinuity* vis-à-vis the interlocutors. Latour seems to have little interest in what the scientists *say* about what they are *doing*. From the point of view of Strathern, his ethnography appears slightly strange, since, for her, everything we deal with are knowledge practices after their fashion, and, therefore, what the persons themselves have to say is absolutely constitutive of the object being investigated. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the kind of ethnographic observation practised by Latour affords him a crucial distance from the rationalist tradition of French epistemology, and, more importantly, allows for a description that suspends the supposed privileged access to the real that we usually attribute to scientists.

This is a problem that anthropologists who study Amazonia or Melanesia do not need to deal with, because we do not normally take for granted that 'the natives' are the happy possessors of a particularly privileged definition of the real. The effort of these exo-anthropologists consists, on the contrary, precisely in being able conceptually to *construct* natives' definitions or descriptions *as* something real.

In his small book on fetishism, Latour uses the description of African 'fetishist' practices to arrive at modern 'anti-fetishism' (Latour 1996). He is little interested by what the 'fetishists' have to say about 'fetishism', presenting them like people who make an object and afterwards put it at the centre of a cult as if they had forgotten that they had made it themselves. What makes them similar to scientists, though, is that they also make an object to afterwards affirm that it had always existed. This kind of approach always seemed to me to be typical of sociology. The African fetishists serve only as a point of support, as supplementary material that helps us respond to a question that wasn't asked by them. Strathern, on the other hand, would seem to be favouring the old ethnographic tradition of anthropology, which would fall back to that well-known line of argument: 'well, it might be like this here in the modern world, but there in my fieldsite it isn't so'. Normally, this is an objection that leads to a kind of grumpy relativism or to a paradoxical generalised particularism. Strathern, however, goes much beyond that. She uses the inadequacy resulting from the application of the familiar discourses of the observer to *expand* the anthropological concepts, not to *restrict* them. Taking some notions put forth by Latour –

network and hybrid, for example – the problem of Strathern is how to simulate what happens when these concepts cross Melanesian material or are crossed by them. All of this is a problem of direction and application: either we simply apply the concept of network to the Melanesians – this is the traditional procedure in anthropology – or we do what Strathern does, which is exactly the opposite: apply the Melanesians to the notion of the network, that is, we redescribe the concept of network with the help with Melanesian realities: Everything happens as (if she were to say) the following: ‘If Melanesians had the will and the patience to read Latour, what would they be able to say about it?’

In ‘The new modernities’, Strathern launches a very interesting critique of the notion of scale, which brings us, among other things, to the Latourian question of the length of networks. According to Latour, the ‘pre-moderns’ have very short networks; they excel in thinking about hybrids, but come short when the problem is generating them. Moderns are very good at generating hybrids and terrible at thinking about them. The non-modern world, the alternative indicated by Latour, will be an ideal combination between the pre-modern and the modern, bypassing the post-modern. Latour seems to have begun with a modern (or post-modern) question and, in that sense, he can’t arrive anywhere else. The pre-modern material in his texts appear more like a corrective, as an example of how the modern ‘constitution’ can be improved. The pre-moderns are interesting to us to the extent that they can think about hybrids, but they are not *sufficiently* interesting, because they cannot expand their networks. Anthropologists are interesting because they are capable of describing, on the same plane, the human and the non-human, but they are not sufficiently interesting because they are only able to do these things away from home. Latour simultaneously praises and rebukes anthropology, says Strathern. Her own critique consists in the dislocation of his question. One should not think about what a network is in Melanesia, but what a network would be for a Melanesian. A network for a Melanesian can be absurdly long, since they involve hundreds of names, types of being and planes of existence. The argument of Strathern is therefore quite different from Latour’s, for whom, in the final analysis, networks, as Melanesians conceive them, cannot exist (as Evans-Pritchard said of Zande witches). The networks promoted by science or by globalisation (networks as scientists conceive them), on the other hand, these can certainly exist.

Thus, in general terms, the basic Strathernian procedure is to ‘ask’ Melanesians what would networks, or hybrids be. The Latourian hybrid musters entities like animal, machine and human. A certain methodological or discursive presupposition that these things are both

relatively homogeneous and exterior to one another seems necessary so that they can cross and hybridise. But in Melanesia this is not necessary. The social relations are already hybrid in themselves. Human beings are hybrids and (literally) heterogeneous. **MG**

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On the other hand, we tend to index relations between humans and non-humans as 'heterogeneous'. In Melanesia this would be problematic, as a yam can be more like me than my brother-in-law. While for Latour you and your brother-in-law are the same kind of thing, the yam is another thing and then the hybrid 'person-yam' is created. In Melanesia – in Dobu, let us say – the yam and the human are already seen as two faces of the personhood of the clan. **EVC**

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Also in 'The new modernities', Marilyn Strathern talks about the 'new culturalisms' using, once again, Melanesian examples. For Clifford, these new culturalisms are the symptoms of the generalised hybridisation and globalisation that he likes so much. Strathern begins her commentary by suggesting that the planetary process of environmental degradation can be coded in the key of witchcraft. For us, the environmental crisis is the result of a relationship between humans, on one side, and nature, on the other. For Melanesians, this isn't exactly what is happening. Witchcraft is a kind of relational theory and the environment appears like an objectification of social relations. For the Melanesians, it is social relations themselves that are objectified in the destruction of the environment. We can see here that while appearing to hold an apparently similar discourse concerning the destruction of the environment, Melanesians have a completely different theory, which must be taken seriously.

Another important point, which appears in 'Cutting the network', is the notion of property, which has a constitutive relationship with the notion of the hybrid. The new technologies and the patenting of life also serve as analysts of this situation. Marilyn Strathern concludes that, in a certain sense, there is only property in hybrids. Property is by definition a hybrid, as it supposes an articulation between persons and things, and assumes that they are different. Strathern gives an example of a man who brings a case to a North American court alleging that his blood was used unlawfully by a multinational company. He ends by losing the case and is even accused by the judge, who says that he has commercial interests. The multinational defends itself saying that the patent is not the blood of the individual but a scientific discovery, a hybrid, a mixture

of nature and culture. The problem of property appears exactly at the moment that Strathern filters it through Melanesia, where the notion of property does not appear to function very well, seeing that it presupposes an exteriority between persons and things. Again she makes her procedures explicit:

In anthropologising some of these issues, however, I do not make appeals to other cultural realities just simply because I wish to dismiss the power of the Euro-American concepts of hybrid and network. The point is, rather, to extend them with social imagination (Strathern 1996: 521).

What happens if we apply these and those concepts to these and those peoples' imaginations – and vice versa? This is the most important question.

In 'Cutting the network', Strathern employs a vocabulary that does not appear in her other texts, including terms like flux and cut; these are absolutely central in the *Anti-Oedipus* of Deleuze and Guattari, even though Strathern makes no reference to these authors. In essence, she defines a network like a cut within a flux. The network is not something absolutely unlimited, in unlimited expansion, but also a blockage. It works by connecting-and-cutting, flowing-and-blocking. Strathern offers examples of the new technologies. For example, a group of 40 people sign a scientific article on hepatitis C. But, of these 40, only six apply for a patent. Scientific activity, the discovery of this virus, is a flux that we could trace infinitely. The work of objectifying the virus of hepatitis C demands the presence of many people. The issue becomes not the length of the networks, but where one could make the cut. Or, in other terms, who will be the owner of this patent. The cut is the property. And the network is also a special way of cutting.

In 'Cutting the network', Strathern relativises the distance between the social networks of classical social anthropology of British transnationalism and the networks of *actor-network theory*, ANT. She also relativises the distance between the classical theories of kinship networks and the studies of modern kinship. For her, what characterises western kinship is exactly the fact that it incorporates that which, it can be said, is not kinship. With this operation, the studies of kinship assume the same characteristic as the studies conducted with ANT. In the West, there is no way to speak about kinship without speaking about biology, without speaking about the imbrications of the biological and the social, which is an exemplary case of the Latourian network. **MG**

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We began this course by drawing attention to the value of anthropological studies of science for anthropology in general, as the anthropology of science examines the problem of the great divide between science and non-science, the West and the Rest. Strathern inverts the direction, showing the value of classical anthropology – studies of kinship, for example – for the anthropological studies of science. The interest in Western kinship is that kinship can become a tool for the analysis even of science. Instead of simply applying science to kinship, let us also see what happens when we apply kinship to science: we get another science; we expand anthropology. The study of Western kinship is the Strathernian anthropology of science. EVC

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Eduardo Viveiros de Castro & Marcio Goldman
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional

Translation by Ashley Lebner